

## Van Morrison's Same Old Song and Robert Finley's New Old Soul

by Peter Stone Brown

Van Morrison has always been about finding that indefinable magic moment, the one that when you're performing lets the song take over and for those brief moments the song and the music is all that matters. When he really hits it, the listener or the audience is taken to that place as well. In the 1980s, Morrison pretty much abandoned rock and roll (he never considered himself a rock singer anyway) and came up with a sound that was about musical perfection, deep in ambiance and tapestry, often quite beautiful mixing R&B and Soul with Jazz and occasional hints of Celtic music. He also started singing in a lower register and while the passion was there, sometimes the fire was not. Every once in a while he'd break out like on the album he did with The Chieftains - "Ragland Road" is one of the most stunning vocals he ever did and albums such as *Poetic Champions Compose* and *Hymns To The Silence*, and his first album of originals in this century *Down The Road*. At times it almost seemed formulaic and old melodies would often be recycled along with ideas and certain topics for songs. There would be the nature song, the great poets or musicians song and the pissed off fucked by the music business song. Ultimately how long the album stayed in the CD player depended on how great the singing was and if he found those magic moments.

Many of the usual Morrison topics are evident on his brand new *Keep Me Singing*, though thankfully there is no song about the music business though a line or two here and there might allude to it. Now 71, though 70 when the album was recorded Morrison's vocal skills are firmly intact as are his instrumental skills on guitar, sax, harmonica, piano and drums. He sounds confident, relaxed and even happy. "Put another coin in the wishing well/Tell everybody got to go to hell" is how the album begins on "Let It Rhyme," one of several songs about romance or lack of it. The album starts out fairly low key, then builds up, pulls back and builds up again. Some songs don't hit you at first such as the title track but on successive listening you realize there's more going on than you originally thought. While several songs express contentment or at least acceptance, there's also a feeling of foreboding, that it could all come crashing down in the next minute.

The song that really hit me, and also the saddest song on the album as well as the best vocal is "Memory Lane." At first you think not another song about autumn, but this time Morrison uses the season to set the scene, a cold November night and a man who doesn't know where he is or so you think at first. It's a bit of skilled songwriting because as the song goes on

you realize that maybe he doesn't want to know where he is because the memory is too painful, and the trick is he never lets you know for sure.

It's followed by an upbeat blues, "The Pen Is Mightier Than The Sword." The song takes on gospel overtones on the chorus when background singers join in on "Every man is me, every man is you/I can't tell you what you're supposed to do." Van is particularly energetic on this, especially on the line, "They're gonna get caught 'cause somebody is a liar, the last word shouted out with relish. Van is equally energetic on the album's other blues, "Going Down To Bangor."

Other highlights are a cover of "Share Your Love," originally a hit by Bobby Blue Bland, but covered by tons of singers, most notably Aretha Franklin and The Band's Richard Manuel on their *Moondog Matinee* album. Van's version in an almost swing arrangement is up there, but when Manuel sang it, it made you cry.

"In Tiburon" is this album's tribute song, to the Beat Scene, namedropping the beat poets and again describing a scene, but it's also acknowledges Chet Baker (complete with a trumpet solo) and Vince Guaraldi and Morrison sings it with longing about a time and place that can't happen again.

The other high point is "Too Late" which was issued as a single (or was it a video?) or both. It's the catchiest song Van's written in a while, which is followed by the closing instrumental "Caledonia Swing."

Is *Keep Me Singing* up there with Van's greatest albums? Not at all, but there's enough going on to keep you listening for quite a long time, and that's good enough for now.

If current or later period Van Morrison isn't your thing, last spring he released *It's Too Late To Stop Now...Volumes, II, III, IV*, which also includes a DVD. While not duplicating a track from the original live set, this set recorded during the residencies at the same venues is even better than the original album with three complete 15 song sets. Morrison is in top form throughout as his band. Yes, a couple of songs appear twice like "Caravan," "Listen To The Lion" and "Cyprus Avenue," but the performances are so engrossing you don't really notice. Morrison (like Bob Dylan) is incapable of singing a song the same way twice anyway. The songs include a wide sweep of Morrison's albums from Them up through *Hard Nose The Highway*, and while unlike the original there is nothing from *Saint Dominic's Prevue*, there is "Wild Night" and "Moonshine Whiskey" from *Tupelo Honey*. There are also quite a few covers from "Take Your Hand Out Of My Pocket" to "Buono Sera." Of the three discs, the first recorded at the Troubadour in Los

Angeles is probably the hottest, but all three shows are smoking! At 50 minutes, the DVD, recorded at the London shows could have been longer, but the set isn't outrageously priced either. The cool thing about the DVD is you get to see some of the often comical interplay between Van and his band, but also some cool stuff like a close-up of guitarist John Platania's solo on "I Just Want To Make Love To You."

Those who miss the great soul sounds of the '60s and early '70s should check out the debut album by Robert Finley, *Age Don't Mean A Thing*, on Big Legal Mess Records (a shoot-off of Fat Possum). Finley, 63 is a soul shouter and guitar player from Bernice, Louisiana is on the bluesier side of things, at times reminiscent of O.V. Wright and also Bobby Bland, though he doesn't have quite the gospel fervor of the former, or Bland's penchant for going from rough to silky smooth at the drop of a hat. What he does have is an incredible amount of passion and feeling. You can hear his life in his voice.

The album opens with a kicking version of George Clinton's "I Just Want To Tell You" which is a variant of "I Wanna Testify" by the Parliaments. There's also a soul version of David Gates' "Make It With You." But it is on his originals such as the title track where Finley truly excels. Even the ballads such as "It's Too Late" and "Snake In My Grass" have a funky edge to them, while "Come On" is firmly in funk territory. However he saves the best for last with the half spoken, "Is It Possible To Love Two People?" where he makes you believe every syllable.

Backed by a crew of veteran musicians, the musicianship and arrangements are impeccable throughout. It will be interesting to see where Finley takes it if he gets to do a second album.